

## JOHN S. KNIGHT'S NOTEBOOK

# Press Taken In by an Absurd 'Briefing'

## Attacks State Dept. Sessions Conducted by Faceless Men

**VIEWS ON THE NEWS:** Every fall, the State Department holds a "briefing" in Washington for newsmen and broadcasters.

I always decline these invitations because the sessions are addressed by government functionaries who have nothing to say, and hide behind a cloak of anonymity.

Even worse is the fact that these faceless men are either not informed as to government policies, or deliberately mislead the more naive members of our profession.

Last year, for instance, some 800 editors and broadcasters returned from Washington convinced that Castro was helpless to mount an attack upon the United States. This was the information given them by the State Department.

Yet a Defense Department spokesman later admitted that the Pentagon learned that the Cubans had medium and intermediate range missiles while the "briefing" was in progress.

At this month's conference, a "high United States official" chided the American press for giving Mme. Ngo Dinh Nhu "a triumphal reception."

The American press, radio and television representatives were told that "such hospitality cuts across the government's effort to put pressure on South Viet Nam for reforms."

This spokesman conceded that Mme. Nhu's visit was newsworthy but believed the scheduling of 29 engagements in the United States to be "excessive."

According to the Associated Press, "the high official may not be identified under the rules of the 'background' conference."



JOHN S. KNIGHT

## Episode Raises Several Questions

All of which gives rise to several questions:

1. If our government trembles every time the fiery Dragon Lady speaks, why was she permitted to visit the United States?

2. Does our government really believe the American press has a responsibility to aid and abet its schemes to put pressure upon the leaders of South Viet Nam?

3. Why would any self-respecting newsmen agree to be

bound by a no-attribution rule with 800 people in the auditorium?

4. Why does the press permit the State Department to get away with this insufferable nonsense, and submit meekly to absurd and unenforceable rulings?

5. Why didn't one single editor or broadcaster "break" the rules and tell the story?

ALL experienced newspapermen know that "off-the-record" conferences are devised to deceive or misinform the people.

Yet many of them agree to the arrangement, either to obtain "background information" or to permit a politician or the government to float trial balloons and see how the public reacts.

This is a dubious practice, often indulged in by the same editors who talk so bravely at newspaper and broadcasting conventions about "freedom of information" and "the people's right to know."

## Sinister Pressures On Radio, TV

Even more sinister are the pressures upon radio and television stations operating under government licenses which can be, and sometimes are, revoked by the Federal Communications Commission.

The Columbia Broadcasting System is so sensitively attuned to its master's voice that it canceled Mme. Nhu's scheduled appearance on "Face the Nation."

CBS President Richard S. Salant explained the network's position by saying that "we feel one more appearance at this time would serve no useful international purpose."

When a major network or a newspaper begins to operate on the theory that the people cannot be trusted to form their own judgments, then we have in effect a controlled press. Controlled, that is, in the sense that timidity replaces responsibility and editors and broadcasters begin playing God.

It is reassuring that the National Broadcasting Co. is not buying this line and will present Mme. Nhu on Meet the Press this Sunday evening.

**ONE FINAL** thought: The Associated Press account of the State Department session said, "the editors and broadcasters were told that the Central Intelligence Agency in South Viet Nam is not doing anything that is not known about and approved by the State Department."

What utter rot!

Every informed correspondent in Saigon knows this has not been so, but the "high official's" statement is pawned off on the American people as the truth.

What modern journalism needs, apparently, are more editors and broadcasters who understand and carry out their newsgathering responsibilities, and fewer of the impressionables who are flattered by official invitations and "heaten to